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ABSTRACT

Kermess is a word of Flemish origin used in the course of time to designate a periodical outdoor festival. Known as "la kermesse" in France, "die Kermes" in Germany, and "la quermes" in Spain, by any name it has come to mean a small neighborhood carnival featuring games of chance and skill, music, refreshments, entertainment, laughter, and fun. In the context of today's emphasis on quasi or actual communication in foreign language learning, the kermess offers interesting possibilities for making learning active and effective and for promoting foreign language study. A kermess may be organized on a very small scale for just one class, with no more than a booth or two, or it can be quite elaborate, involving an entire school district or community. With the aid of the teacher, the students themselves put the kermess together and assist in the preparation of dialogs and lists of typical expressions for use with each activity. To effectively promote foreign language learning, the kermess should be staged where it can be seen and heard. Parents, school officials, and community leaders should be invited to see how students can communicate successfully in other languages at an activity that all enjoy. (Author)

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The Foreign Language Kermess: Carnival-Type Activities for Language Learning and Promotion

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KER·MESS (kur´-) noun 1 In Flanders, etc., a periodical outdoor festival. 2 An indoor or outdoor festival imitative of the Flemish. Often spelled kirmess. Also KER·MIS.

In the context of today's emphasis on quasi or actual communication in foreign language learning, the kermess offers interesting possibilities. Dating back to the Middle Ages in Flanders and Holland, the kermess exists today in France as la kermesse, in Germany as die Kermes, and in Spain as la quermés (also la kermesse). By other names, small neighborhood carnivals featuring games of chance and skill, music, refreshments, entertainment, laughter, and fun exist in many lands.

Since going to my first quermés in the popular and authentic barrio de Lavapiés in Madrid some 22 years ago, the idea of staging foreign language kermesses has intermittently excited my imagination. At Weber State College, some elements of the kermess were incorporated into several foreign language festivals I helped organize[1] and later, in Chile, a full-fledged kermess with the theme MISSISSIPPI SHOWBOAT was organized under the auspices of the Instituto Chileno-Norteamericano de Cultura de Valparaíso y Viña del Mar, of which I was the administrative director. This kermess attracted thousands of enthusiastic participants who had agreed to check their Spanish at the gate and use nothing but English. More recently, my Spanish conversation class joined Gloria Meléndez's at BYU's 1976 Foreign Language Fair to put on a little kermess for visiting high school students.

A kermess can be as big as all outdoors or it can be scaled down to classroom size. One that should be tried (and some day I may volunteer) is an amusement park kermess, using facilities like the Lagoon's or (Think big!) Disneyland's. Call it Foreign Language Day, Carnival, Kermess, or whatever, all games, rides, shows, etc. would be given a foreign flavor, with flags, banners, decorations, signs, sales pitches and patter, tickets, food, menus, music, etc. appropriately adapted. Not only would students and teachers be invited but also native speakers and all others with a degree of proficiency in a language or with a special interest (parents, brothers and sisters, principals, school board members, civic leaders, etc.). This was the approach to invitations employed at the great SHOWBOAT extravaganza in Chile. No other activity attempted at the Instituto generated more free publicity or created greater enthusiasm for studying English.

Public relations aspects aside, the kermess idea is good for communication. Kids are tired of mechanically parroting back artificial patterns. How often does contrived manipulation strip them of any internal need, inclination, or impulse to say something on their own? Is there anything in the environment, activities, materials, or atmosphere conducive to real communication? There won't be as long as planned parrothood continues to inhibit natural urges, impose artificial barriers, abort fresh conceptions, produce stillborn anomalies, and achieve for our profession zero or negative growth. Who wants parrots? Let's try for eagles, awkward fledglings that fall and fracture the language but keep trying their wings until they finally flutter, flap, fly, and even soar.

Organizing a small-scale kermess is easy, because everyone likes to help. Start by assigning pairs of students to prepare booths and language aids to go with them.

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Let them use their own imagination, after suggesting a number of possibilities for them to get the idea. Last spring at BYU the most popular booth (Don't ask me why) was the water pistol gallery with burning candles for targets. (This kermess was held outdoors.) At very little expense, with a couple of boxes and boards, some butcher paper and crepe paper, candles from home, and a water pistol borrowed from little brother, a very attractive booth was put together. Many booths can be even simpler, but however they're made, the teacher ought to be around to help the students talk the language while they work. For nearly a decade I've been committed to "conversación"(conversación con acción), in the belief that any kind of action involving things that can be described, explained, or referred to in any way while being demonstrated, made, shaped, taken apart, cooked, played, sketched, colored, operated, danced, pointed at, performed, etc., etc., encourages active, engaged use of the foreign language. Of course this requires a lot of help from the teacher (or teacher aides), even when specially developed language aids are available, and that's where "personalization" comes in, the most important part of teaching, which at last is receiving renewed emphasis.

Simple ideas for booths include: fish pond, mirror walk, cord pull, dart throwing, ring toss, toy car race, baseball pitching, Mexican jumping bean derby, nail hammering, "floating island" coin toss, etc., etc. Many books with ideas for attractions of this type are available in most libraries. A good one in French is Jeux de Kermesse, which has been translated into Spanish as Juegos de Kermesse.[2] After completing their booth the students prepare signs and language aids. Signs should have catchy captions and give necessary instructions, rules, and the price (in pesos, etc.). Pertinent vocabulary items and longer expressions may be printed on cards or sheets. Endless-loop cassettes may be employed for continuous playback of short, simple utterances which students can listen to over earphones, preferably in teams of two, and then recombine for conversation. Audio-flashcards are also good for this purpose. Illustrations should be used where possible. For the FISH POND, a single drawing can be used to present such items as fishing pole, hook, line, sinker, bait, reel, creel, floater, etc. Dialogs could be given with a translation:

¿Cuánto vale? How much?
Cinco pesos por tres minutos. Five pesos for three minutes.
Dame la caña. Give me the fishing pole.
Dame los cinco pesos. Give me the five pesos.
Aquí los tienes. Here they are.
Toma la caña. Take the fishing pole.
Me voy a pescar una ballena. I'm going to catch myself a whale.
¡Epa! Se me escapó. Whoops! It got away (from me).

Students should be allowed to generate their own utterances--in the foreign language or in English, corrected or converted to the target language with help from the teacher or other qualified persons. Though students should conscientiously practice and prepare themselves ahead of time, at the kermess every possible prompt, cue, and hint--printed, recorded, or live--should be devised in every ingenious way to help them communicate. They get stage fright, they forget, they prepare half-way. Don't let the fun fizzle for anyone. Have aids and aides for them. But don't let anyone read her or his "lines" from a card, and adhere strictly to the rule that only the foreign language may be spoken--at the "Me Tarzan, you Jane" level, if nothing else. That's communication and it can be dramatic as well as comic and at critical moments friend-making and lifesaving.

Students not assigned to prepare games may be placed in charge of MONEY EXCHANGE (using play money or real Mexican pesos, as some teachers have done), REFRESHMENTS, ANNCUNCEMENTS AND MUSIC (over a loud speaker), FORTUNE TELLING, MAGIC SHOW, etc.

Some students may want to be clowns or work up a funny act of some kind. A hilarious possibility is to rig up a fake LOST AND FOUND stand stocked with all kinds of weird objects, from over-size false teeth to old-style corsets allegedly lost by visitors to the kermess. Each object should be appropriately labeled and language aids prepared. "Son tuyos estos dientes? A ver, abre la boca." (Are these teeth yours? Let's see. Open your mouth.)

Prizes should be as different and special as possible, but inexpensive. Sweets with printed wrappers attesting to a foreign origin are a good possibility. The students themselves can make such things as paper flowers and small piñatas. I can make known a source for free comic books in Spanish. As for drinks and goodies, students can make punch and cookies with a foreign look or flavor.

All elements of a kermess should be adjusted to the age-level of those involved, and features encouraging rowdiness must be avoided. In my experience, however, all ages have enjoyed even obviously infantile things when approached through a foreign language, and even college students can laugh unrestrainedly and unselfconsciously at kidstuff.

Do I hear you membling "He calls that a small-scale kermess?"? Remember, a kermess is often most successful when shared among schools in the same district or different classes in the same school. One school or class may be hosts and the other guests, with this later reversed. Also, the whole thing doesn't have to be put on at once, and it can be as large or small, elaborate or simple, as desired. Just a single booth could be prepared and enjoyed by students who take turns running it and patronizing it. Several weeks later another booth could be set up. At many schools this could be done right in the classroom. If other facilities (gym, multi-purpose room) are available, so much the better. In good weather, however, nothing beats having a kermess of any size outdoors.

Nobody notices foreign language learning when contained in the classroom or restricted to books and mental activity. Spectator sports and shows attract the crowds, corner the money, and get the publicity. Foreign language study has got to become more visible. And audible. Get some action going. Let there be communication. Put on a kermess. Put it out where it can be seen. Let it be heard. Make it good. Have fun!

[1]Hall, Wendell H., Planning a Foreign Language Festival, Ogden, Utah, 1964.
[2]Limbos, Edouard, Juegos de kermesse, Barcelona, 1970.

(This article was originally published in the Utah Language Quarterly, May, 1977.)